DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 369 SO 020 574

AUTHOR Radner, Susan G.
TITLE Curricular Transformation and Academic Freedom: How Far Can We Go?
PUB DATE Jun 89
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Women's Studies Association (Baltimore MD, June 15-17, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Freedom; College Curriculum; College Environment; Feminism; Higher Education; Intellectual Freedom; Minority Groups; *Professional Autonomy; *Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS William Paterson State College NJ

ABSTRACT

What is the intersection between women's studies and academic freedom? How does the work that is done by women's studies educators, the development of both new courses and programs, and the transformation of the traditional curriculum to make it more inclusive of the concerns of women and other minorities, impact on academic freedom--the basis of any scholarly enterprise? Can the goals set by these educators be accomplished without violating academic freedom? These were the questions being asked at William Paterson College (New Jersey) as the Women's Studies Program expanded and moved more directly into the center of the curriculum. A definition of academic freedom is written into the contract of teachers at all nine New Jersey state colleges, which protects faculty in the classroom in three ways: (1) to choose what to teach; (2) to choose how to teach it; and (3) to choose how to test it. Realizing the restrictions this places on the department, the only way to maintain the integrity of the program is through voluntary compliance. Faculty members should try to create an atmosphere where feminist issues are seen as an important part of the curriculum and people who are not concerned about this new material are perceived as academically out-of-date. (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED315369

Curriculum Transformation and Academic Freedom: How Far Can We Go?

Susan G. Radner

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

SUSAN G. RADNER

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 020574

Curriculum Transformation and Academic Freedom:
How Far Can We Go?

Susan G. Radner

What is the intersection between women's studies and academic freedom? How does the work we do as women's studies educators, the development of both new courses and programs, and the transformation of the traditional curriculum to make it more inclusive of the concerns of women and other minorities, impact on academic freedom--the basis of any scholarly enterprise? Can we accomplish our goals without violating academic freedom? These are questions that we at William Paterson College have been asking, as our program has expanded and we have moved more directly into the center of the curriculum.

The Women's Studies Program at William Paterson College, a New Jersey state college, is one of the older ones in the country. In addition to an eighteen-credit minor (established 1977), we sponsor a three-credit general education requirement in Racism and Sexism in the U.S., which can be filled only by a Women's Studies course, "Women's Changing Roles," an African, Afro-American Studies course, "Justice and Racism," or a course sponsored and taught by both faculties, "Racism and Sexism in the U.S." Every student (approximately 1,000 a year) must take one of these courses to graduate. For the past three years, we have been concentrating our energies on trying to integrate issues of race, class and gender into the curriculum. In 1986-1987, a grant from the New Jersey Humanities Grant Program enabled us to revise course syllabi for four humanities general education courses, "Writing Effective

Prose," "Introduction to Literature," "Intermediate Spanish," and "History of Western Civilization," to make them more inclusive. We have tried to continue these efforts and to expand them to other courses in the humanities and social sciences. It is in these contexts that issues of academic freedom have arisen.

Faculty, librarians, and non-teaching professional staff at all nine New Jersey state colleges are represented by the Council of New Jersey State College Locals, American Federation of Teachers, which has negotiated our collective bargaining contract with the state. A definition of academic freedom is written into the Agreement: "Academic Freedom derives from the nature of the quest for knowledge. It is essential to the full search for truth and its free exposition, applies to both teaching and research, and shall not be abridged or abused. . .. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. . . . 1. Employees are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of results. 2. An employee is entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing his or her subject. 3. Employees are citizens and members of a learned profession. When the employee speaks or writes as a citizen, he or she is free from institutional censorship or discipline. . . ." (p. 3). From the above definition, it seems clear that academic freedom protects faculty in the classroom in three ways: to choose what to teach (another clause in the Agreement gives faculty the right to choose textbooks); to choose how to teach it; to choose how to test it.

It is important to remember that without the concept of academic freedom--the protection from the majority who may not share our concerns--women's studies could never have been born or developed. Psychology could not have attacked the concept of penis envy, history could not have recognized Elizabeth Cady Stanton, literature appreciated Marge Piercy. Indeed, we are facing a backlash now because of our success, from people like Secretary of Education William Bennett, Closing of the American Mind Alan Bloom, Cultural Literacy E.L. Hirsch. The common thread of all their arguments is that education must return to the traditional concept of what an educated man (sic.) is and should be--that any attempt to analyze the social/economic/racial background of a writer or to discuss his or her relevance today is to (newly) politicize knowledge. They also assume that it is possible to test whether or not a student has mastered this fixed body of knowledge.

The Modern Language Association Committee on Academic Freedom recognizes the dangers of this approach. It released a strong statement in the Summer 1988 Newsletter: "The committee believes that censorship occurs when instructors are encouraged not to teach particular works, when instructors are expected to teach only what some might regard as "the classics," when teachers are expected to "teach to the exam" to ensure high performance on standardized tests, or when students are warned against expressing certain critical points of view in the classroom." Later in the same article, the committee says "Jeremiads decrying the present state of higher education are often accompanied by attacks on recent developments in critical theory, skepticism about the

increased representation of women and minority authors, and doubts about the legitimacy of diversity and of reaching beyond Western tradition. We applaud an open and lively debate, but we remain concerned that too many people (including some of our colleagues) lack awareness of the negative possibilities in the drive for national lists, standardized tests, and universally accepted canons." (p. 19)

We must remember our history as we prepare to move our concerns into the center of academic life. Now that we are trying to transform traditional courses by including race, class and gender, and recruiting new faculty to teach our well established courses (as well as tackling larger campus issues such as sexual harassment and racism), we must add to our feminist agenda a commitment to academic freedom, recognizing the limits it sets on us.

And academic freedom restricts us in definite ways. For example, when we give someone a syllabus for a course, we must assume some latitude in how she will approach it. We may not insist that she use a certain textbook, or teach a particular writer, or even teach a specific idea, unless that topic is explicitly stated in the department course syllabus. If the person teaching the course is tenured, we may not observe the class without her permission (at the state colleges, this rule is set in the collective bargaining agreement). Common exams (which we are currently discussing in our Racism and Sexism in the U.S. course), also restrict academic freedom, as the MLA Committee on Academic Freedom noted, since people always teach for the exam and not what they think is important. Certainly, we may not check up on faculty

by asking students what they are learning in the class--this would bring on a grievance automatically. I recently received a note from a women's studies adjunct, who had been trying to teach sexism in language. One of her students had complained about her English teacher, who was refusing to permit his students to use "he or she." The adjunct wanted to know what could be done about him. The answer, unhappily, is nothing: he is a tenured full professor of English and he is teaching according to his standards of "good" usage.

But we do need to maintain the integrity of our program. The only way we can do this, in my opinion, is through voluntary compliance. We must assume the best of people, not the worst, and we should provide opportunities for them to learn from us. Specifically, for new people teaching in our program, we can give out lists of films, books, material to include in the courses. We can offer faculty seminars (e.g. the Race and Gender seminar at WPC), where issues of course content and pedagogy can be discussed. We can share our own syllabi and tests. We can discuss how to teach certain aspects of our course (a very successful seminar last year was on the topic "How to teach about Affirmative Action"). With all colleagues, we can share our work. Our Women's Studies Program sponsors a First Tuesday lunch discussion, where women's studies faculty discuss issues of concern to them. It has received wide publicity throughout the college, and several faculty members have brought their classes to the talks. We can take the risk of sharing our articles with members of our departments. The point is, we should try to create an atmosphere where feminist issues are seen as an

important part of the curriculum, and people who are not concerned about this new material are perceived as academically out of date. By doing this, we will recruit mo e faculty to our cause; however, there always will be some who will be untouched. They are the price we have to pay to maintain academic freedom.

Again, we have to remember that we will always be the targets of those people who, talking about the closing of the American mind, really want to close universities to all but their own elite--that our professional livelihood depends on an open atmosphere, protected by academic freedom. If we use the same tactics as the people who are trying to close us down, we will have no protection at all.

Women's Studies Program
William Paterson College
Wayne, New Jersey 07470